

Town of Lincoln

Budget Board Meeting

March 25, 2014

Present:

**​Carl Brunetti​​Bob Turner​​Paul
DiDomenico​​Maria Marcello
​Richard Foster​​Bill
DiBiasio​​Bill McManus**

Absent:

**​Hagop Jawharjian​​Rhonda Lacombe​​Mike
Babbitt​​Paul Deutsch**

Call to Order

The meeting began at 7:32 pm with the Pledge of Allegiance.

Approval of Minutes

The minutes of March 20th were distributed for review.

Bill DiBiasio made a motion, seconded by Richard Foster, to accept the minutes.

The minutes were approved by unanimous vote.

Correspondence

Responses to the questions sent by the Budget Board were received by the School Department.

They noted that in order to determine how many positions had been subtracted in recent years it would take a significant amount of time and resources and questioned the need for that.

Public Comment

Patricia Willis noted that she was concerned about the class size information that the Budget Board had being different than the actual records.

The Superintendent had not yet contacted the Budget Board with the actual numbers.

After reviewing the information, the only major difference in the information that the Budget Board had was one classroom that was marked as having 22 students but reportedly has 27.

That may be due to it being an inclusive classroom though.

Ann Bibeault, LPT Vice President, noted that the classroom cap for early elementary is 23 students, and that 6 out of 9 Kindergarten classes are over that cap.

It was noted that there is a provision in the teachers' contract that provides for those overages.

Melissa Goho, Teacher and Parent, noted that just looking at enrollment numbers does not give the full picture of demographics and additional needs.

She gave the example that at the High School, in 2010 25% of the students were receiving free or reduced lunches, which is now up to

31%.

(The Budget Board noted that according to their records received from the RI Department of Education, the High School only has a 9% rate of free and reduced lunches).

At Northern that need has increased from 33% to 42%, and Lonsdale is at 32%.

She was concerned that there is continually increasing need of services, but there are programs and services being cut.

When the Budget Board asked specifically what programs or services were being cut, an example was given of a Nurse position at Saylesville not being filled, and Psychologists being shared among schools.

Also, Readings Specialists have decreased from 20 positions down to 12.

The Budget Board noted that they can ask questions regarding those kinds of things, and get detailed information from the School Department as they are deliberating the budget, but also noted that in the end their proposal will be a bottom-line recommendation and it is then up to the School Committee to determine how that money is allocated and spent.

Ann Bibeault noted that the teachers present at the meeting were just there in support of more money for the budget so that things like class size can be improved and the Town can compete with the Charter Schools.

The Budget Board noted that the Schools consistently run a surplus in the operating budget, which actually amounted to approximately \$1.6 million last year.

Before that money reverts to the capital surplus fund, the School Committee has full reign over how those funds are spent as long as it does not exceed what was allocated by the Financial Town Meeting.

Stacey Josselin, Parent, noted that she moved to Lincoln for the schools and now her son is in a larger class size and not receiving the quality of education she had hoped due to that.

She noted that she is now advising people not to move to Lincoln for the school system.

Representative Greg Costantino was present and questioned whether surplus funds can be used for any expenses in capital or operating as the schools see fit.

The Budget Board noted that operating surplus can be used for capital improvement projects and emergencies but it cannot exceed the amount allocated at the Financial Town Meeting.

Brian Ackerman, Parent, also moved to Lincoln for the school system and stated that he would be willing to pay higher taxes in order to properly fund the schools.

He felt that the ratio of K-2 classrooms is far too high and they should have 20 or fewer students per classrooms for effective instruction at that level.

Melissa Goho noted that one appeal of charter schools is they offer lower ratios of an average of 15 students per class.

Rhonda Sexton noted that there is a proposed reduction next year of a .5 FTE Social Worker at the High School.

The Budget Board discussed that the School Committee's proposed budget was actually a 5.17% or \$2.57 million increase over the previous year, and that was the maximum allowed by the 4% cap set by state law.

The Town Administrator then takes that recommendation and reviews it in order to make a proposal of his own.

The Budget Board takes both recommendations into consideration when they deliberate the Education Budget and then propose their recommendation for the vote of the Financial Town Meeting.

Usually the Budget Board's recommendation falls somewhere in between the School Committee's recommendation and the Town Administrator's proposal and will not likely be a reduction from the previous year's budget.

The Budget Board noted that they have received detailed information on projected enrollment which seems to show a similarity to what happened in the 1980's with a bubble in the K-2 grades.

It was noted that if there are class size issues, they should discuss with the School Committee whether there are open classrooms that

could be used to alleviate that problem.

Donna Rowland noted that there is a lack of space in the lower grades, and that the purpose of Fairlawn Early Learning before it was closed was to alleviate that.

She also noted that just because there is a provision in the contract that provides for compensation for the teachers for larger class sizes, that does not mean it is the best or most effective thing to do.

MaryAnn McComiskey, School Social Worker, noted that while the demographics of the Town are moving back to the levels of the 1980's, the districting back then was very different.

She noted that the point the teachers present were trying to make is that even though the Budget Board does not allocate the funds specifically, they do decide the overall budget and whether that will be level funded, etc.

Certain support services are necessary, and certain increases are necessary to keep those intact.

Because costs are increasing, level funding does not necessarily provide for the same things.

The Budget Board noted that they do take individual pieces of the budget and analyze them in depth and ask questions of the School Department and request more detailed information before they make recommendations.

Pam Mazzenga, Lincoln Resident and Parent, noted that she is an active member of the PTO and is also on a Committee that works with the Superintendent and also attends the School Committee meetings. She was urged to go to the Budget Board regarding her concerns with classroom sizes.

She noted that her concerns are not only for those students with higher needs, but more specifically for those students who are high performing as larger class sizes do not allow the teachers to devote the attention and time required to challenge them.

The Budget Board noted that last year, while the Town did level fund the local contribution to the education budget, they did have a \$1 million overall increase.

Ann Bibeault felt that the ratios given in the media of 1-10 were misleading because it included all service positions, etc. and it in reality is probably more like 1-22.

The sizes at the early elementary level and the outreach program were of particular concern.

She also noted that there is not enough space in the classrooms because of that to be more active and move around when necessary.

Melissa Goho emphasized that the teachers present are asking the Budget Board to support the School Committee's recommended budget without any reductions to their proposal because the students' needs are not being met and the Town is losing students to

the charter schools.

The Town Administrator T. Joseph Almond discussed the way he arrives at his proposal for the education budget.

He first reaches out to all PACs and the PTAs offering to meet with them to answer any questions and hear concerns.

This year he only heard back from one that he sent that invitation to.

He then looks at the total available funding and how well that is doing on a state-wide basis.

The data is all available that will show that Lincoln is not above the state average on class size, free and reduced lunch, etc.

The Town Administrator agreed with the comments that Fairlawn Early Learning Center maybe should not have been closed.

He noted it was the School Committee's decision to do so and he is not sure a proper analysis had been done prior to that.

There were no reductions in resources, such as teaching jobs, related to that closure.

The Town Administrator noted that according to his information there is a 10-1 combined certified staff to student ratio.

He also noted that Central is the fastest growing school, but the School Committee and not the Budget Board would be the ones to reallocate or redistribute resources to accommodate for that.

Salaries have increased recently by 10.83% including steps.

The Town Administrator disagrees with the Budget Board regarding how schools may spend operating surplus as he interprets it that they can spend it anywhere and any way they see fit.

He feels confident that his recommendation is the proper level of funding and it provides for unexpected things that might come up as well.

The Schools have not been level funded even though the maintenance of effort has been level funded because there has been \$5 million in new aid in the past 4 years.

Without that much state aid, 2 years ago 86% of the costs of the education budget were the responsibility of the taxpayers.

The Town Administrator believes the issues being brought up, such as class size, is all about how the schools have managed and allocated their resources, which is a product of the School Committee.

He noted that he has proposed a 2.7% increase to the education budget, where the municipal budget has not seen a 2% increase in 4 years.

He believes that if the schools looked at compensation and salary negotiations to lower those it would be more funding on the table for the education system.

From 2002-2006 the local appropriation to the education budget

increased by 40%.

Fred Hoppe, Union President, noted that members have decreased from 322 down to 288 due to positions decreased, retirees that haven't been replaced, etc.

The Town Administrator was interested to see the details of that information as well as providing it to the Budget Board as there had been declining enrollment of almost 400 before the charter schools even existed.

The Budget Board noted that if anyone wanted information on class sizes by grade, enrollment projections, etc. that can all be found provided by the state at NESDEC.ORG.

The Town Administrator noted that in recent years, most school systems in RI were forced to cut their education budgets by 5% or more, but Lincoln never had to do that.

He also noted that the education budget is \$51 million total to service approximately 3,000 students which is very high when compared to other communities of like size.

The municipal budget has cuts each year, and they are facing increasing costs just as the schools are.

Representative Greg Costantino noted that the state budget is looking at some serious deficits in the coming years.

The anticipated deficit in 2016 is expected to be \$181 million.

In 2017 it is expected to be \$260 million.

In 2018 it is expected to be \$350 million.

By 2019 it is expected to be \$470 million.

Brian Ackerman noted that when he moved to Lincoln, it was an older community which has moved on and it is becoming younger and that dynamic needs to be recognized.

The Budget Board agreed that the ratio of 1-10 is probably not accurate because that cannot be calculated by using straight forward numbers as there are many factors that make class sizes different.

A member of the Budget Board will be looking closely at the detailed classroom breakdowns to get a precise idea of what is going on with class sizes.

It was noted that the cost of employing a teacher varies depending on their experience/step.

Top-Step Teachers could receive over \$100,000 per year, but new employees are generally hired at 2nd or 3rd Step.

The Budget Board discussed that the problem with large class sizes is trying to spread them out which might take some reallocation of resources and thinking differently, even the possibility of redistricting.

When Fairlawn Early Learning Center was closed, the building reverted back to the domain of the Town and it is now being leased with a new lease currently being negotiated.

The Town Administrator noted that the enrollment population is going to continue to decline, and that while redistricting does not always work currently only Central is at full capacity.

The RI Department of Education has all data available on per-person footage, maximum class sizes, school capacity, etc.

In 2008 there were 180 births which would lead the projection and trend to say that many students would be entering Kindergarten in 2014, but that number actually ended up being 210.

The projections for declining enrollment do take into account charter school enrollments, and the Town Administrator noted that the charter schools actually have larger ratios in smaller classrooms than the public schools in Lincoln when the FTEs are divided up.

Business

FY15 Municipal Budget

The Town Administrator T. Joseph Almond and Finance Director John Ward were present to answer questions of the Budget Board and discuss the FY15 Municipal Budget.

John noted that he had to get information on education aid directly

from the state, and there is an additional amount received that was not included in general state aid to education.

In March the state does another census of the schools and they redo the aid formula before the budget passes.

The Town has in the past received grants for the Substance Abuse Coordinator but since the state grants have diminished, the Town made an agreement with the schools that the schools would take over funding of the Literacy Center and Municipal Budget would pay for the Substance Abuse Coordinator.

However, the municipal budget currently pays for both.

Therefore, the Town Administrator proposes adding a line for \$10,000 in Human Services for the Substance Abuse Coordinator and decrease Grants in Finance by the same \$10,000 so there would be no net change in grants.

The goal is to eventually have a regional Substance Abuse agency which will combine state grants.

In an update to the status of Butterfly Dam, it is almost complete.

The Town per consent agreement will submit plans to DEM for \$200,000-\$250,000 in repairs to be completed in 2015-2016.

For the Library, the Town must allocate an appropriation equal to the prior year to meet the maintenance of effort in order to receive reimbursement.

Therefore, the Town Administrator is requesting that his originally

proposed reduction in health care be reversed to be level funded.

There has been a maintenance issue with the Town Hall heating system not operating properly for the past 2 years.

The Town Administrator thinks an \$8,000 increase in Maintenance would be good.

In regards to the public comment at the last Budget Board meeting regarding the Senior Center, the Town Administrator noted that they do charge a small fee for residents, and a little bit more for non-residents just to cover the cost of membership cards.

He will check with the Director of the Senior Center regarding the claim that classes are full and difficult to get into because of out of town people attending.

He was also not aware that any other communities charge any fees for the use of their Senior Centers, but they do charge for classes and activities.

The Town Administrator stated that the Senior Center building is not near capacity, but there may be a shortage of parking if anything.

In response to the resident request for a rowing machine, the Town Administrator noted that there is money in the Senior Center budget for something like that.

They bring in 501c3 funds, as well as revenues from Twin River and the “Friends of the Senior Center”.

Additionally, they may apply for a Champlain Grant and it could be

taken out of that.

The Town Administrator noted that by law the new field proposed would be under control of the School Department with an informal agreement for use with Parks and Recreation.

The order of use of the fields would be School Leagues first, Parks and Recreation Leagues second, other Lincoln Leagues/Organizations third, and out of town Leagues/Organizations last.

The Town Administrator recommends waiting a year for analysis before determining what the field could bring in for revenues which would be put in an enterprise fund to pay for maintenance and expenses.

The state law says categorically the renovation of the existing field would not be eligible for reimbursement.

It may be reimbursable if they renovate the entire campus and not just the field.

The Town Administrator proposed to the Budget Board that since the Town may be looking at doing something with the High School in 2017-2018, that they fund \$50,000 to complete a study of that for Stage 1 of the project since the RI Department of Education requires a 2 Stage Plan.

The study would not include any architectural drawings but would

complete a study of the entire campus and include excavation, energy regulations, etc. and give a better idea of what can be done. The \$50,000 funding could come out of the tax levy and be funded by resolution or it could be put into the operating budget.

The Town Administrator will research how to go about putting together a Building Committee for the project and whether that would be a function of the Financial Town Meeting.

The Budget Board noted that the scope could be changed to include a comparison of doing whole new facility instead.

After completing more research on the Chase Farm House, the Town Administrator is requesting at least \$15,000 in additional funds for electrical and heating work to bring the building up to code.

The Town will still move forward with the project because once it's up to code the responsibility of maintenance would be on the caretaker.

After looking at the information on the Police Department addition more comprehensively, the Town Administrator feels confident that if it is funded as proposed that will be good because the estimates are high.

The Town Administrator distributed a drawing of the land that the Town owns next to the Water Department.

The entire lot near the Public Works garage is under the jurisdiction of DEM because of contaminants.

So if something was to be built there, it would all have to go through

DEM.

The Town Administrator noted that the Police Department addition could not go there because there is too much ledge and not enough room for parking.

Also, if a new building was constructed there was discussion of moving the School Administration to the old building but it would require serious renovations, the building wouldn't be big enough for their needs and they would lose reimbursement for it if the School Administration were not in a school campus/building.

The Town Administrator noted that it will be important to remain conservative with spending in the coming years as the Town comes out of recession.

He noted that the Town would not be able to take on that much more debt to construct a new building without hurting the bond rating.

The Town has to watch taxes carefully because all other expenses are going up and the Town is beginning to draw new businesses again and they want to continue that.

The State of RI faces a dismal financial future and the only growth in revenue anticipated (short of new taxes) are \$400,000 in Real Property Taxes, \$80,000 in Motor Vehicle Taxes and an unknown amount in Tangible Property Taxes.

The Town Administrator noted 10.83% in compounded increases in teacher salaries, and the fact that there would be as much as \$2 million more in funds for the education budget if that hadn't been

done.

It also increased the gap between the school salaries and municipal salaries.

He discussed class sizes and the fact that the Town has less students than ever and needs to look more closely at reallocating resources.

Also as an example, Barrington has a similar population to Lincoln and have \$4 million less in their education budget.

Cumberland educates 1,500 more students for a budget of \$8 million less.

The Town Administrator writes letters to all the PACs and PTOs offering to meet with them regarding his budget proposal and so far only the Middle School has responded.

The Town Administrator is having postcards sent to all taxpayers inviting them to attend the Financial Town Meeting.

FY15 Education Budget

Richard Foster made a motion, seconded by Bob Turner, to defer any discussion of the Education Budget for the next Budget Board Meeting.

Public Comment

There were no public comments or questions at the time.

Adjourn

Bill DiBiasio made a motion, seconded by Richard Foster, to adjourn

the meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 10:14 pm.